

## BENNINGTON COLLEGE &amp; THE VAPA BUILDING

When Bennington College opened in 1932 it immediately became famous -- notorious, some would have said -- for innovation and experiment, and was long the center of passionate controversy, of serious study by foundations and educators, and of sensationalism in the press. But its sureness in accomplishing what it set out to do is indicated by the fact that it was soon accredited, on its own terms, and its degree accepted in the leading graduate schools of the country.

Its program rested on a few articles of faith that were then considered radical: a belief that the only lasting sources of a meaningful education were self-motivation and self-discipline -- this meant no "false incentives" such as grades, exams, competitive prizes; a belief that different individuals had different abilities and needs -- this meant no required curriculum but individual choice and individually determined programs; a belief that the arts (music, drama, dance, as well as the visual arts) were as valid a part of a liberal education as the humanities and sciences -- this meant performance and production, in contrast to the passive "appreciation" courses of the traditional curriculum; a belief that if students were to learn responsibility they must be given responsibility -- this meant no parietal rules except those which

they might make themselves, no compulsory class attendance, no watchful housemothers; a belief that a college should not be an ivory tower but a part of the real world of its own time -- this meant work in the community as well as in the library, and a non-resident term where job experience supplemented college experience; in short, a belief that the true goal of a liberal education was the awakening of a creative and disciplined mind. This twin concept of creativity and discipline was the bond that united all fields of study, critical inquiry, scientific research and artistic creation in a common approach that was basic to the Bennington philosophy.

The college that grew up around this philosophy was different from its contemporaries in many ways: in its informal faculty-student relationships, small classes, tutorials, and provisions for a flexible curriculum; in its busy studios and workshops, always attracting more students than they could hold; in the make-up of its faculty, which included practicing professionals and artists-in-residence along with teachers. Even the campus reflected the Bennington philosophy, replacing the traditional collegiate architecture with simple country buildings.

Now, in 1972, it is hard to remember that all this once seemed visionary. And here probably lies the real measure of Bennington's achievement, in the fact that today its innovations are everywhere becoming accepted.

But success has its ironies, the field has caught up, the gap is closing -- does this mean that Bennington has lost its role as a leader and innovator? The record of the last five years answers this question. In this period of widespread academic disorder the Bennington

community was able to call upon the strengths built up through forty years of experience with the freedoms that students and faculty are today demanding on many campuses. It knows that the line between freedom and anarchy -- both political anarchy and intellectual anarchy -- must be carefully drawn. At Bennington, political freedom exists in the context of a whole community, and intellectual freedom exists in the context of a whole educational experience. This concept applied to the arts in the same spirit as it is applied to the sciences and humanities helps explain why the teaching of the arts as part of a total academic program has always been one of Bennington's special strengths. The "awakening of a creative and disciplined mind" means something very different from just doing your own thing.

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Bennington is small and purposely so. Because this smallness guarantees a serious response to experimental ideas and proposals, Bennington's role in American education has become a testing laboratory or workshop for our larger institutions. This role, because it attracts a particularly lively and adventurous faculty and student body, also serves and rewards the individuals who go there.

Clark Kerr, writing as Chairman of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, recently said: "Bennington is clearly one of the limited group of liberal arts colleges that can provide high quality education for its students without growing to our suggested minimum enrollment (of 1,000)."



The College was originally designed for a student body of 250. The number grew slightly over the years until in the early 60's it became apparent that a small faculty with many one-man or woman departments was no longer educationally viable, and the decision was made to expand in planned stages to 600 students in order to support additional faculty positions, while preserving the favorable student-faculty ratio. The aim was to allow a greater diversification of teaching staff and course offerings but at the same time to keep the advantages of small size -- small, at any rate, in relation to the postwar growth of so many other institutions. Applications for admission at Bennington were on the increase all through the 60's, and the expansion was accomplished without the usual disturbance of admissions standards. In 1969 the college became coeducational, and this too was accomplished without difficulty. Today Bennington admits one out of six applicants. The student body numbers 585 with a faculty of 64.

Founded during the depression, Bennington opened with almost no endowment (\$102,685), and its capital funds have always been limited (\$1,890,410 today). From the start it had no choice but to be an innovator in financial as well as educational matters, and it adopted the policy of setting tuition at a figure that actually covered costs -- an experiment which, like its other innovations, seemed shocking at the time but is today gaining currency. What this meant was that students who could afford to pay, paid the true cost of their education. Thus all available funds supplied by the annual giving of parents, alumni and friends could be used to provide financial aid for other students.

Bennington's whole financial life has been bounded by depression, war, and inflation -- it would be hard to imagine a harder time for a fledgeling enterprise to survive and the fact that it has come through, and indeed come through without any major emergencies, is a tribute, not only to the vitality of the college but to its financial administration. Raised in a hard school, Bennington learned thrift early, and today, when many American colleges and universities are faced with financial crisis, Bennington operates on a balanced budget.

As part of the expansion program, a building campaign was launched in 1967. Its purpose was not only to make room for the college's growing numbers but, more importantly, to provide new facilities in areas where advances in teaching would be made possible by new kinds of space and equipment. With the exception of the Crossett Library, no academic building had been built on campus since the college opened in 1932. Particularly in the visual and performing arts, the limitations of space and equipment were hampering the exploration of new media and new modes of expression. For example, experimentation with the simultaneous use of light, color and sound projected from different parts of the environment calls for flexible performance space, while the large scale of contemporary painting and sculpture requires studios of far greater size than did the art of the 30's.

To date the first phase of the program has been completed and seven new buildings have been built: three dormitories -- Fels House, Noyes House, Sawtell House; the Dickinson Science Building; the Tishman Auditorium; the Suzanne Lemberg Usdan Art Gallery; and a ceramics kiln and studio.

The Gallery and ceramics building are designed to be part of a six million dollar Visual and Performing Arts Center (familiarily known as the VAPA building) which constitutes the last major phase of the program. This is by far the most ambitious, and probably also the most significant, building project that Bennington has ever envisioned. Designed by Robertson Ward, Jr., the VAPA building is conceived as highly flexible modular space: pliable interior volumes responsive to the demands of those who use them and capable of variation and transformation as needs change. When it is finished, the building will at last give the college the physical facilities that its ever-expanding work in the visual and performing arts needs, and in off-term time it should become an artistic focus for the Southern Vermont region, an area that in recent years has been an increasingly active sub-center of the American art world. The VAPA complex will be an event both in the life of the College and the larger community.

A detailed plan for financing construction and debt service and for providing future endowment is attached. All that needs to be pointed out here is that at this very moment the college has an unusual opportunity to realize its goal by taking advantage of the offer of a low-interest-rate loan subsidized by HEW. The trustees agree that if a total of \$4,262,000 can be raised -- part for construction, part to meet the debt service payments -- the college will be in a sufficiently secure position to take up the offer. In fact, not only could the college build the building, and meet the debt service, but at the end of 30 years \$4,650,000 in new funds would be available as endowment. As this is written, \$3,296,000 is in hand or firmly pledged, leaving \$966,000 to go.



There is only one catch. HEW's offer carries a deadline. If we are not in a position to borrow the necessary money by December 18, 1972, it will be lost. And as this means submitting a contractor's bid, which in turn means that final working drawings must be prepared, the effective decision -- whether we go ahead or give up -- must be made this October.

To raise \$966,000 between the months of June and October is not an easy job for a small college, especially one that is still young -- its oldest alumni in their mid-fifties and the majority still under forty. But this chance is too great to be missed.

Accordingly, the trustees have unanimously pledged themselves to an all-out effort, and are now asking alumni, parents, friends and foundations to join them in what is surely the most exciting race with time of Bennington's career.